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Conservative Soft Power: Liberal soft power bias and the 'hidden' attraction of Russia

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The study of soft power in international relations suffers from a liberal democratic bias. Throughout the literature, liberal concepts and values are assumed to be universal in their appeal. This bias has led scholars to underestimate Russian soft power by instrumentalizing it, that is, to see it purely as the effect of government-sponsored programs, and to focus solely on the cultural pillar of soft power. This paper argues, alternatively, that Russia's conservative values and illiberal governance models generate admiration and followership, even outside of what Russia claims to be its post-Soviet sphere of influence. Crucially, this admiration and followership perform the traditional function of soft power: generating support for controversial Russian foreign policy decisions. Admitting that soft power can be based on conservative values is necessary not only to understand Russia's foreign policy potential, but also the ability of non-Western states to successfully challenge the Western liberal order.

Keywords: Russia, soft power, liberalism, conservatism

Introduction

The rise of illiberal powers and the challenge they pose to the liberal international order has been a focal point of contemporary IR debates (Ikenberry 2014, Lieber 2014, Narlikar 2013, Schweller 2011, Alexandroff and Cooper 2010, Hart and Jones 2010). Optimists believe in the resilience of current arrangements by arguing that non-liberal powers are beneficiaries of the Western-led system, downplaying their adherence to different value systems (Ikenberry 2008, 2010, 2015) Pessimists consider these differences in values to be irreconcilable and argue that the rising illiberal powers are bound to challenge the rules of the liberal order, inevitably creating a diverse international order (Kupchan 2014, Hurrell 2013, Acharya 2014). An important element within this debate centres on the effectiveness of non-liberal powers in offering and promoting alternative values (Beeson 2013). If non-liberal powers are effective in promoting alternative values globally, the populations also supporting these values can help the rising powers resist Western pressure. The increasingly pluralist global order forecast by the pessimists becomes much more likely. If not, then the optimists have more reason to be optimistic.

This paper engages in this debate by studying Russia's promotion of alternative values through one of the central concepts of international value promotion: soft power. All soft power scholarship to date has dismissed Russia's potential attractiveness to global audiences or has demonized it as simply propaganda. This paper argues that this perception is mistaken, but

not because the sources and effects of Russian soft power are hidden from view. Rather, soft power theory and scholarship has a liberal democratic bias that obscures the possibility of thinking about the conservative and authoritarian nature of Russian soft power. In other words, most considerations of soft power make an implicit and, from our point of view, incorrect assumption that soft power may only be derived from a pool of liberal values. Conversely, the authoritarian practices and normative conservatism of governments such as Russia must only be corrosive of soft power capabilities.

As a result of this bias, we argue that the literature analysing Russia's soft power suffers from two major deficiencies. First, the assumption that Russian ideology cannot be attractive leads almost all scholars to understand Russian soft power in a purely instrumental way. This places the scholarly focus on the production side of Russian soft power and prohibits an understanding of Russia's activities as anything other than propaganda, ideological aggression, or "soft power" in inverted commas (Gerber and Zavisca 2016, Horvath 2016). Russian soft power is simply a product of Kremlin machinations to spread Russian culture to receptive groups or to disrupt Western soft power through increasing the amount of uncertainty in the media. The idea that Russian political and social ideology might be attractive unto itself, which might lead to an examination of the reception side of soft power, is never considered. Second, because Russian conservative values are assumed not to have soft power potential, scholars focus exclusively on the cultural side of its soft power. This combination of instrumentalization, often tied to declining national budgets, and the focus on the cultural side of Russian soft power artificially limits the geographical scope of potential soft power influence to the post-Soviet space since, according to these propositions, this is the only area where Russia is likely to have soft power capabilities.

We argue, alternatively, that Russian authoritarian and conservative values have unrecognized soft power effects. These effects materialize not only in other authoritarian states, but also among the growing populist and conservative constituencies in liberal democracies and across the world that have been of recent concern to academics and practitioners alike (Hawkins 2016, Mudde 2016: xxiii-xxiv, Lazaridis, Campani, and Benveniste 2016, Martin 2016). This pervasive blind spot to Russia's soft power has led scholars and policymakers to systematically undervalue Russia's ability to make controversial foreign policy actions since, as we will demonstrate, actors influenced by Russian soft power are more likely to support Russian foreign policy. Moreover, rejecting the potential attractiveness of illiberal values closes off an important avenue to understand potential challenges to contemporary international order. If our hypothesis holds true, then the possibility of an increasingly pluralist international order needs to be taken seriously, and those who support the current liberal order need to be aware of the effects of Russian soft power capabilities in order to respond appropriately to this challenge.

In order to support our argument, this paper proceeds in three steps. First, we will show that soft power theory has an implicit liberal democratic bias. Though there is some acceptance that ideological soft power can come from a plurality of sources, most authors fall back on liberal democratic ideals as the only values that can lead to soft power influence. Second, we demonstrate how these ideas have affected the academic and practitioner debates over Russia's soft power. Russia's conservative system is never seen as a potential source of soft power and,

when mentioned at all, is always portrayed as eroding Russian soft power rather than bolstering it. Lastly, we show how the effects of Russia's conservative soft power can be seen among populations in liberal democracies and across the world, leading to not only admiration, but also support for controversial Russian foreign policy.

The Liberal Democratic Bias of Soft Power

The use of Joseph Nye Jr.'s conception of soft power has become a common practice among academics and practitioners. It has become a canonical reference point for the vast majority of writing on soft power that has not only failed to challenge the liberal bias we identify, but often has played a role in replicating it. Soft power, according to Nye, is a particular power of attraction to a state based on the appeal of its culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye Jr. 2004: 11, 2008: 96). Nye distinguishes soft power from hard power in that the former uses this attraction to help states get what they want, whereas the latter uses either carrots or sticks to produce political effects (Nye Jr. 2004: x). Soft power grants states 'the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants' (Nye Jr. 2004: 2), particularly given that 'seduction is always more effective than coercion.' (Nye Jr. 2004: x) To possess soft power lessens the need to coerce or bribe other states to get what you want.

Nye gives several reasons why soft power can lead to political influence. Soft power can grant legitimacy and moral authority to foreign policy objectives. This, in turn, increases the possibility of persuasion and lowers the cost of leadership because others will see themselves as having a duty to ensure the success of these values (Nye Jr. 2004: 2, 6, 7, 11). It can also lead states to emulate this attractiveness, changing their preferences. This can create followership (Nye Jr. 2004: 5, 14, 2008: 94), or help to set and manipulate the agenda by making opposing preferences of other states seem too unrealistic (Nye Jr. 2004: 7, 2008: 95).

Though soft power comes from a mix of culture, political values, and foreign policies, this paper focuses specifically on the attractiveness of political values and the respective foreign policies that match these political values because we believe this is where the liberal bias lies. Nye argues that there are two factors that generate political attractiveness. First, the state must have political values that reflect universal values. Second, the state must conduct foreign policies based on these universal values. States that can fulfil both of these criteria are likely to have large soft power resources. Conversely, those states whose values and foreign policies are seen as either narrow or parochial are far less likely to produce soft power (Nye Jr. 2004: 11).

So which particular values are likely to be the most attractive? Nye does allow for the possibility that soft power resources are contextual (Nye Jr. 2004: 4, 16). But once this caveat is made, Nye continuously comes back to a particular theme: liberal democratic values are the most attractive ones. He argues that 'Many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive,' (Nye Jr. 2004: x) and can be 'powerful sources of attraction.' (Nye Jr. 2004: 55) Nye does admit the possibility of non-liberal sources of soft power, for instance, in how hard power can be attractive through myths of invincibility (Nye Jr. 2004: 9). Liberal democratic values will additionally not be attractive to all. Nye notes that 'individualism and liberties are attractive to many people, but repulsive to some, particularly fundamentalists.' (Nye Jr. 2004: 55) Still, Nye does not see non-liberal values as having very

much soft power potential and essentially argues for the existence of a 'silent majority' of liberal democratic supporters in these countries, who quietly admire Western values despite facing government repression (Nye Jr. 2004: 56).

Non-liberal states such as China and Russia therefore cannot generate soft power without adopting liberal norms. To increase their soft power, Nye argues that both China and Russia need to 'be self-critical, and unleash the full talents of their civil societies.' (Nye Jr. 2013) At best, authoritarian models like the 'Beijing consensus' put forward by China will only be attractive in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states and damaging to soft power influence with the West (Nye Jr. 2005, Kurlantzick 2007: 43, Cho and Jeong 2008: 466). Importantly, Nye is far from the only scholar to assume that non-democracies need to emulate liberal democratic values in order to gain soft power resources. All subsequent studies of soft power in non-liberal or emerging democracies we have found simply replicate this assumption, be they about China (Bates and Huang 2006: 28-29, Huang and Ding 2006: 40, Suzuki 2009, Cho and Jeong 2008: 472, Wagner 2012: 310-313) India (Malone 2011, Mullen and Ganguly 2012, Tandon 2016),Turkey (Altunışık 2008, Kalin 2011), Venezuela (Corrales 2009) or the Asian region more generally (Hall and Smith 2013: 10-11).

In sum, although Nye technically allows for a wide range of political values to be soft power resources, in practice he comes back time and again to one particular source: liberal democratic values. As Yulia Kiseleva (2015: 3-4) has argued, in his unfettered emphasis on the 'universal' attraction of liberal values, Nye seems to see them as self-evident and enduring. This assumption is then repeated throughout the literature on soft power: no other set of values can be conceptualized as being attractive; no other set of values could possibly spread beyond its narrow cultural setting. This uncritical belief in liberal democratic values leads to a particular type of empirical blindness: the inability to see non-liberal political values as potentially attractive. This consequently has serious consequences in our estimation of Russian soft power capabilities.

Limitations of Russian Soft Power Scholarship

Given Russian political elites' ambitions for the country to be regarded as a great power in the international system and the increased tensions between Russia and the West in the past decade, understanding the extent and sources of Russia's soft power has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest. Though this literature is large, we argue that it has a common problem: an uncritical application of Nye's soft power concept that presumes that Russia cannot generate soft power from its political values, reflecting the liberal democratic bias we have identified in the literature more broadly.

The dismissal of Russia's ideological soft power has long roots. Throughout the 1990s and in the early 2000s it was common both among Western and Russian analysts to argue that Russia suffered from an 'ideological emptiness', especially in comparison with the liberal democratic message of the West. Indeed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the devaluation of communism, the Russian government presented itself as deliberately avoiding any ideological commitments. Russia's foreign policy was understood to be pragmatic, interests-driven, and hence objective as opposed to ideologized (Morozova 2009: 671, Romanova 2016:

375, 377). As a result, normative scholarly discussion centred on the domestic realm, engaging with the question of Russian identity, while foreign policy analysts shunned questions of guiding values and ideas.

This assumption of a statutory de-ideologization continues to this day. Magda Leichtova, for instance, notes that Russia 'possesses almost no political "soft power" for its neighbors or partners.' (Leichtova 2014: 20) Agnia Grigas similarly argues that 'Russia's influence does not display the emphasis on legitimacy and moral authority stipulated by Nye.' (Grigas 2012: 9) Others have suggested that Russia is out of touch with global values, repeating Nye's argument that soft power works best when it reflects 'universal', *i.e.* liberal democratic, values. In Konstantin Kosachev's words, 'there is no doubt that countries where human rights enjoy maximum protection and where democratic institutions are well-developed look the most attractive.' The problem is that 'Russia cannot export some model as an alternative ... because it has not developed any such model yet.' (Kosachev 2012) More recently this was echoed by Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, who argue that 'Russia is unable to make its domestic socio-economic and political model attractive and sell it to other nations.' (Sergunin and Karabeshkin 2015: 358) Even in mid-2016, Wolfgang Ischinger argued that 'Russia's foreign policy appears … [to be] lacking any form of "soft power."' (Ischinger 2016)

This assumption has created two major deficiencies in the literature. First, scholars analyze Russian soft power in overly instrumentalist ways, that is, they presume that Russian soft power must be linked to an active strategy about what the Russian government does or plans to do: there is no conceptual space to consider how Russian values might be attractive unto themselves. Second, when the Russian soft power literature does not completely dismiss the possibility of Russian soft power altogether, it exclusively focuses on the culture pillar of soft power.

Instrumentalization of Russian Soft Power

The first problem, that the literature by and large only considers soft power as a centrally-orchestrated tool of Russian foreign policy, is widespread.[1] From this perspective, soft power is only generated by Russian policy endorsed by the regime and financed from the state budget. With a complete focus on the production side of soft power, the state is seen as the major architect, approaching the subject in a programmatic way (Wilson 2015b: 1175, 2015a: 294, Lankina and Niemczyk 2015, Burlinova 2015).

This instrumental approach can also be seen among critics that portray Russian concepts and ideas as being devoid of any real content and used primarily to mitigate the influence of the West. Christopher Walker, for instance, warned against 'authoritarian learning,' where non-democratic states such as Russia employ Western techniques to promote their political views. This includes the use of 'government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs), ... and both traditional- and new-media enterprises' that operate 'with the aim of subverting authentic debate, either by spreading regime messages in a non-transparent way or by crowding

[1] Yulia Kiseleva, who noticed and criticised this specificity of scholarly writing, is a notable exception (Kiseleva 2015: 1)

out authentic voices.' (Walker 2016: 51)[2] The creation of this infrastructure allows Russia to project its message into democratic space while censoring ideas coming in the other direction, therein practicing 'a more malign mirror image of soft power.' (Walker 2016: 61) Other authors coined the phrase 'soft coercion' to describe Russia's practices. These are characterized not by attraction, but by the exploitation of weaknesses in the governance of targeted states. Instead of 'leading by example,' Russia employs means akin to Soviet-era coercive techniques (Sherr 2013, Lo 2015) that aid in galvanizing Russia's sphere of influence through its imperialist nature (Tsygankov 2006: 1085-1087, Sherr 2013).

This instrumentalization consequently affects how we understand the scope of Russian soft power, since it directly links these capabilities to the ability of the state to fund and promote them (Wilson 2015a). While we recognize that the power of the Russian purse has political effects, especially if it engages in sponsoring specific parties (Bremmer and Charter 2014), this instrumentalization leads scholars to focus only on the production side of soft power. Even authors sceptical of ideological kinship developing between the Kremlin and Europe's far right admit that, money aside, a specific attraction emanates from Putin's Russia (Pomerantsev 2015: 43) and admit that 'European extreme right parties and organisations respect the Kremlin for its might and vigour' (Shekhovtsov 2014). By focusing on the reception side of soft power, we aim to show that several groups across the world see Russian values as attractive and Russia as a leader in promoting these values. Moreover, they are also more forgiving of controversial Russian foreign policy, which is the ultimate purpose of soft power. Understanding Russian soft power purely instrumentally, ignoring this possibility of conservative allure, simply underestimates the power of Russian soft power influence.

The Cultural Pillar of Russian Soft Power

Compounding the problem of instrumentalization is a second assumption that follows from the liberal bias. Since conservative Russian political values cannot be attractive, scholars primarily focus on cultural soft power, which geographically limits potential soft power influence. In this vein, authors have identified several key elements underpinning Russia's cultural attraction: the Russian language, Russia's ties with existing Russian diasporas, and the Orthodox religion.

The existing scholarship considers the Russian language to be the strongest asset in Russia's soft power arsenal, where the Russian World (*Russkii mir*) concept makes use of the Russian language to legitimize Russia's civilizational aspirations in the post-Soviet world (Kudors 2010, Laruelle 2015b). The role of language is reinforced by Russia's revived attempts to strengthen bonds with Russian diasporas, promote Russian language teaching and learning in former Soviet republics, spread Russian mass and high culture to Russian-speaking regions, sponsor education for foreign students at Russian universities, and finance Russian-language media (Hill 2006: 345, Grigas 2012: 9, Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012: 8, Sergunin and Karabeshkin 2015: 354, 356, Jackson 2010: 110, Tafuro 2014, Trenin 2010: 196, Rukhadze 2016). Russia's religious attractiveness is also described as a potent tool. The Orthodox Church is seen as the soft power arm of the Russian state in regions of the world where orthodox religion holds sway (Chawryło 2015, Romanova 2016). This type of influence is, according to Russia watchers,

[2] See also: (Vojtíšková et al. 2016)

used to sway former Soviet republics away from the West (Makarychev 2016). Finally, the RT television channel (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Russia Beyond the Headlines* are the chief English-language vehicles for Russia's soft power (Ioffe 2010, Laruelle 2015b), in addition to the sponsoring of Russian-friendly NGOs in neighbouring states (Lankina and Niemczyk 2015: 107, Popescu 2006: 2).

While we do not object to the inclusion of cultural elements into Russian soft power capabilities, the overwhelming focus in the literature cognitively curtails Russian soft power projection to the post-Soviet space. Some recent academic studies attempt to correct this overemphasis by considering the ideological messages stemming from Russia. For instance, Valentina Feklyunina argued that the collective identity of the Russian World, as a unique civilization possessing a form of politics distinct from Western political models, has a role in Ukrainian foreign policy-making (Feklyunina 2015: 12). Elena Chebankova similarly argued that there is a distinct collection of values in Russian conservatism that seeks to differentiate itself from the West (Chebankova 2016). In both cases, however, the focus is quite limited. Chebankova understands Russian conservatism to be bereft of an ideational basis that could claim universal significance (Chebankova 2016: 44-46). Feklyunina's focus on Ukraine and the Russian World, while a step in the direction of analysing Russian ideological pull, lacks an engagement with the broader phenomenon of conservative attraction.

In summary, we argue that the analysis of Russian soft power suffers from three serious deficiencies. First, the liberal democratic bias within the soft power literature is directly replicated in the Russian soft power literature. Second, this analytical setup prioritizes instrumental understandings of Russian soft power, since the possibility that Russian political values might be attractive unto themselves has been cognitively eliminated. Finally, these assumptions leave scholars with only cultural values as soft power possibilities, which limits the possible geographic area of Russian soft power projection. In setting ourselves apart from this literature, we seek to show that by identifying and subsequently transcending the liberal democratic bias within soft power research, thus taking the potential for conservative soft power seriously and examining the reception side of soft power, we can identify a significant amount of empirical evidence that suggests that Russia has soft power resources that cluster around non-liberal ideology. Unlike the instrumentalist understanding, these soft power resources should not be merely dismissed as Russian propaganda, but taken seriously as a series of ideas that have independent and growing attractiveness to conservative individuals around the world.

Analysing Russian Soft Power

Given our interest in demonstrating Russia's effectiveness at promoting alternative values, we follow Laura Roselle et al.'s (2014: 72) advice to concentrate exclusively on the reception side of soft power rather than on the production side. To operationalize our task, we need to have some idea of how to tell if soft power is in effect. Nye is helpful here, since he gives two reasons why soft power increases the possibility of persuasion. First, others see a duty in upholding the soft power values. Second, the ideas are so attractive that they create followership. So we need to see some commitment to the ideological values espoused by Russia and/or declarations that Russia is a leader in this regard. Instead of looking for these effects on a state level, following

Feklyunina (2015: 8), we argue that the reception side of soft power is not going to be homogeneous within any state. Different domestic actors will respond differently to Russian political values, and it is not necessary for the state as a whole to respond positively to argue that Russian soft power is having an effect.

According to Nye, one way of gauging the effect of soft power within a population is through polls and focus groups to understand the attractiveness of the other state. However, as Christopher Layne points out, there is a missing causal link between favourable public opinion and favourable foreign policy outcomes, that 'public opinion does not make foreign policy, the state's central decision makers do.' (Layne 2010: 56) While public opinion polls and other mass-articulation of support for Russian values are no doubt part of the picture, we propose that the effects of soft power are also reflected in the articulated beliefs of political actors. These are good signals for Russian soft power because the discourse of political elites is not costless, that is, the discursive choices politicians make can end up helping or hurting them. In supporting positions that might attract international derision, such as admiration for Russian conservative values and/or calls for followership, political elites signal either their personal belief in the ideology, or at least a belief that it will have some domestic political resonance. The argument for the existence of Russian soft power is further strengthened if, as Feklyunina (2015: 8) suggests, there is a high degree of admiration and/or followership across many different conservative discourses emanating from Russia. Finally, in accordance with Nye's theory, if these pro-ideological positions are also accompanied by support for controversial Russian foreign policies, then we have our last piece of evidence that Russian soft power is in play.

In our analysis of conservative ideology we decided not to follow an ideal typology, instead adopting a quasi-inductive approach.[3] We started from a modest but sharp distinction between liberalism and conservatism, contrasting the liberal importance of the individual and the rejection or contestation of hierarchy and authority, with the conservative respect for hierarchy, state-authority, and the superior value of the interests of the group over those of the individual. We then collected data that reflected support for Russian conservative values and analysed which specific elements of the ideational and governance package resonated with those on the receiving end of Russian soft power. From this, we created four categories that we believe reflect current Russian ideological soft power capabilities: moral conservatism, illiberal governance, strong leadership, and anti-Western foreign policy. We will take each in turn.

Moral Conservatism

The first category, moral conservatism, consists of a cluster of values that are centered on the maintenance of a sexual and religious status quo reflected in conservative Christianity. The Kremlin tends to frame the social conservative agenda under the banner of 'traditional family values'. For instance, Vladimir Putin famously asserted Russia's moral superiority over the West in his 2013 annual State of the Nation address, promoting a strong social conservative position,

[3] The main justification behind this course of action is that meanings ascribed to conservatism in Russian and Western political thought are not the same, see: (Chebankova 2013) Rather than amalgamating both perspectives into one ideal-type, we inductively distinguished four categories reflecting Russian ideological soft power.

speaking to a hidden populism amongst other peoples subjugated by their own government's more liberal position, and actively positioning Russia as a leader in the promotion of these values (Putin 2013). Legally, this discourse has been matched in what Human Rights First termed 'Russia's brand of legislative homophobia' (Human Rights First 2014). In June 2013 Vladimir Putin signed a bill outlawing propaganda of 'nontraditional sexual relations,' justifying it with the need to protect children from information which would propagate the rejection of 'traditional family values.' (Solomon 2014) The Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation upheld this line of thinking, arguing that motherhood, childhood and family are under special protection of the state according to the Russian constitution (Keene 2013).

There is evidence that this ideological position has resonance in Western Europe and the US. In Italy, the far-right Fronte Nazionale expressed its support for Putin's 'courageous position against the powerful gay lobby' with a poster campaign launched in 2013 under the title 'I agree with Putin!' (Shekhovtsov 2014). Frauke Petry, a spokesperson of a German Eurosceptic party Alternative für Deutschland, and Jürgen Elsässer, chief editor of the far-right Compact magazine, appeared as speakers at a conference 'on family issues' co-organized by the Russian Institute of Democracy and Co-operation in Leipzig (Shekhovtsov 2014). Russia's anti-gay laws and its crackdown on LGBT citizens have inspired and found understanding among American right-wing groups. American Family Association spokesman, Bryan Fischer, declared that Russia's gay propaganda ban matched exactly the type of 'public policy that we've been advocating' (Mantyla 2013). On the global scale, Russia-backed traditional values found receptive audience among some members of the UN Human Rights Council. In 2012, the Council adopted a resolution reaffirming the importance of 'traditional values'. Among 25 supporters were a few non-Western democracies, such as India and Philippines, and a number of authoritarian regimes, China, Angola, and Vietnam above all (Horvath 2016: 887).

These anti-LGBT preferences are frequently linked to a larger admiration of Russia's Christian values, seen by many as the 'true' European values threatened by encroaching liberalism. The Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, for instance, expressly looked for salvation from modern European values in Russia, telling Vladimir Putin that 'the Church can only count on support from God and from Moscow' (Szpala 2014: 5). Front National leader Marine Le Pen similarly declared in 2014 that Vladimir Putin and her defend 'common values', which are 'the values of the European civilisation', in particular its 'Christian heritage' (Francetv Info 2014, Tétrault-Farber 2014). Russia's leadership in defending Christian values was echoed by the leader of Hungary's ultra-nationalist Jobbik party (Krekó, Győri, and Juhász 2015: 6), the Italian ultra-Catholic and neo-fascist party Forza Nuova (Savino 2015, Shekhovtsov 2014), Italy's Northern League, a regionalist political party whose ideology spans the left-right spectrum (Savino 2015) and, across the Atlantic, by Patrick Buchanan, former Republican presidential candidate and political commentator (Blue 2013). The appeal of a Christian Europe was also reflected in immigration debates in France and Germany, where anti-immigrant protesters made signs calling for Russia's support against Muslim immigration, chanted 'ship Merkel off to Siberia and Putin to Berlin,' and carried Russian flags in some demonstrations (Nikitin 2016, 2015b).

Illiberal Governance

In addition to conservative values, Russian soft power benefits from an increasingly attractive illiberal governance model, featuring an unrestrained executive, a reduction in the freedoms of civil society groups within the state, and a populist form of government supported by nationalism. Russia has been centralizing its decision-making process and narrowing the scope for political activity since the 2000s, introducing reforms that reinforced the position of the president while weakening the parliament and civil society. What emerged is a system criticized by some Western literature as 'weak authoritarianism' (Hanson 2007) but, as we will show, is valued by other political actors in the world.

The illiberal governance model has particularly inspired Hungary. In 2011 Victor Orbán's government adopted a new constitution which was criticized by the Venice Commission for its weakening of the parliament (Venice Commission 2011, Pickering and Holm 2014). Orbán openly defended his reforms by pointing to successful states that are neither Western nor liberal, such as Russia. In Orbán's opinion, 'the era of liberal democracies is over' (Orbán 2014), because Western states are becoming less competitive, so Hungary must 'break with liberal principles and methods of social organisation, and in general with the liberal understanding of society.' (Orbán 2014) This narrative of the political competitiveness of non-liberal rule, mirrors the discourse used successfully in Russia prior to its economic slowdown of 2014 (Bashkatova 2013). A state's economic success, its ability to provide for its citizens and achieve state security, is correlated with strong rule.

Some states have begun to replicate Russia's preference for eliminating potential sources of domestic opposition, particularly civil society actors. Russia passed a 2012 law that requires non-profit organizations that receive foreign donations and engage in 'political activity' to register and declare themselves as foreign agents. This law gives state authorities measures to weaken and even close down NGOs deemed to be too politically engaged. In Hungary, Orbán has depicted NGOs as 'activists financed from abroad' (Hooper and Frolov 2016: 20), using similar language to the Russian model. The Chinese government has also initiated similar measures, with prominent Maoist websites praising Russia's crackdown in addition to Chinese efforts (Famularo 2015).

Finally nationalism constitutes an important element of contemporary Russian normative discourse and it has become a potent governance tool. It helps create a continuity of Russian greatness, but it also results in a particular relationship to the outside world: the nation is a *sui generis* protection against the external world and its disturbing effects, and thus requires patriotism and loyalty from its citizens (Putin 2014a, 2015b). Several European political leaders have positively associated Putin with the restoration of a great Russia, a notion combining national pride and a belief in historical destiny that is mimicked in Front National narratives that invoke the 'Eternal France' (Alduy and Wahnich 2015: 132). In the United Kingdom, George Galloway welcomed Putin's efforts to 'restore national pride and dignity' (Manning 2006), while former Scotland First Minister Alex Salmond argued more recently that he admires 'certain aspects' of Putin's politics, particularly the fact that Putin 'restored a substantial part of Russian pride and that must be a good thing.' (Herbert 2014) We can also see Russia's stress on ethnic nationalism reaching across established borders in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán has been

castigated by neighbouring states for using symbols of 'Greater Hungary' that include current Romanian territory (2015a).

Strong Leadership

While the conservative values and governance models of Russia have had some soft power success, Putin himself is a major source of ideological soft power for Russia due to perceptions of his authoritative style of rule. Interestingly, the attractiveness of Putin's leadership style is felt on both the right and the left. Putin is perceived as a real leader, particularly when compared with weak democratic politicians. The Russian strategic narrative has thus been adopted by those political elites interested in aligning themselves to the myth of a saviour (Polyakova 2014, Pearce 2015).

This type of strong leadership is clearly appealing to autocrats, such as Belarus' Lukashenka, but also finds favour amongst citizens in states that underwent a successful transition from communism (Lankina and Niemczyk 2015: 105). For instance, a survey carried out in 2015 by the *New Serbian Political Thought* magazine found that Serbs bestow a considerable amount of trust in Vladimir Putin, with a 36.1 per cent positive ranking that was five times as high as the next most popular foreign leader. A member of the Serbian social democratic party argued that Putin's high popularity rating is due to Serbs perceiving him as a 'cool, collected, and decisive leader.' (2015d) A late-2015 Gallup poll additionally showed that citizens of Armenia, Serbia, and Bulgaria all gave Putin double-digit net favourability ratings (Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research and Gallaup International 2015).

Putin has also garnered praise for his decisive leadership style from a number of European political elites (Polyakova 2014, Schmitt 2016). Marine Le Pen finds several important qualities in Putin, including courage and frankness (2014b). The leader of the Left Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, also systematically defends Vladimir Putin for his strength as a leader (Arfi and Perraud 2015). Yannick Jaffre, a philosopher with close ties to the Front National, even entitled his biography of Putin, *Vladimir Bonaparte Putin*, drawing a parallelism between Napoleon's and Putin's lives (Jaffré 2014). The leader of the British right-wing UK Independence Party, Nigel Farage, has named Vladimir Putin as the world leader he most admired because 'If you poke the Russian bear with a stick, he will respond.' (Polyakova 2014: 38) Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has similarly praised Putin's leadership style on numerous occasions (Foer 2016).

Putin's popularity also extends beyond the West. An online poll conducted in China by the *Global Times* daily in 2014 suggested that 92 per cent of respondents support him (2014a). A 2015 Gallup poll similarly gave him a 55 per cent net favourability rating (Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research and Gallaup International 2015). Chinese netizens have fondly nicknamed the Russian leader 'Putin the Great' (Page 2014) or 'Emperor Putin' (Allen-Ebrahimian 2015). Putin is also the central focus of numerous popular books. In 2014 there were more than 60 titles on the Russian leader available on the Chinese book market, including: *Putin's Iron Fist*, *Putin: Perfect Man in Women's Eyes* and *The Charming King Putin*. Zheng Wenyang's *He Is Born for Russia* sold over 250,000 copies since its 2012 publication. Putin's popularity, as explained by a researcher on Russia at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, arises because 'Many Chinese think our country's diplomacy is too weak. So Putin's

strong stance against Western countries has made him an idol among Chinese' (Yi 2014). Putin is seen to have brought stability to Russia after the turmoil of the 1990s, so the Chinese regard him positively as a 'strong emperor' (2014a).

Foreign Policy

According to Joseph Nye, soft power is more potent if the ideological component matches the foreign policy of the state. We argue that there are two elements within broader Russian foreign policy that map onto their ideological preferences that have augmented the attraction of their conservative values. First, Russia's criticism of the US-led liberal international order and the related anti-Westernism maps onto Moscow's promotion of conservative values. Second, Russia's defence of sovereignty against Western intervention maps onto Russia's nationalist values and fearlessly standing up against the global superpower.

Russia has been overtly critical of the US-led post-Cold War world, denouncing most elements of US dominance (Lo 2015), arguing alternatively for a highly pluralist global governance system (Putin 2015a, 2013). This requires the formation of a new international order (Putin 2012a) that reflects the unique place of Russia, and is legitimized by Russia's role in the history and development of human civilization (Putin 2012b, a) as a 'counterbalance in international affairs and the development of global civilization.' (2013).

On the reception side, anti-Americanism couched in pluralist terms has convinced a far greater number of political actors than has the vision of Russian leadership. Within Europe, Russian anti-American sentiments appeal to radical forces on both ends of the European political spectrum (Polyakova 2014: 37-38). They share with Russia a vision of Europe that would distance itself from the US, drop its supranational agenda, and limit the export of European norms and values to the rest of the world (Laruelle 2015a: 3). The European extreme right admires Russia for what it perceives as its successful challenging of the international status quo, characterized by the domination of the West, and its questioning of the global role of the US (Shekhovtsov 2014). Scepticism towards the European Union and values underpinning European integration drives pro-Russian attitudes among a number of right-wing parties. In Hungary, Jobbik's leader described Russia as a 'counterbalance against a lopsided Euro-Atlanticism' (Krekó, Győri, and Juhász 2015: 6). At the other end of the European political spectrum, anti-Americanism can explain the positive approach towards Russia among substantial parts of the French and Italian left (Laruelle 2015a: 2). We can also see this in states like Greece, where only 31 per cent of Greeks in a 2014 poll wanted the US to lead in the world, versus 52 per cent who saw Russian global leadership as desirable (Bechev 2015), reflecting a 'subtle disposition towards authoritarianism' (Petsinis 2015).

In addition to the anti-American component of Russian foreign policy, current Russian leadership attaches high value to sovereignty. This concept has become an indispensable element of almost every public speech in Russia and is intended to be heard abroad. This discourse emphasizes Russia's role as a leader of non-liberal politics and a defender of state sovereignty worldwide (Kiseleva 2015: 325). Despite the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Kremlin continues its criticism of the United States for transgressing the sovereignty of other states. For instance, Putin has recently argued that, 'Ever more frequently today we hear of ultimatums and sanctions. The very notion of state sovereignty is being

washed out. Undesirable regimes, countries that conduct an independent policy or that simply stand in the way of somebody's interests get destabilised' (Putin 2014b).

This discourse resonated with Donald Trump, who openly supported a 2013 *New York Times* op-ed written by Putin that opposed American exceptionalism and interventionism in Syria (Foer 2016). This discourse also found adherents in many politicians in the EU who are sceptical of the European integration project that potentially destabilizes ethnic identity and state sovereignty. The general idea of being independent of others, be it Brussel's bureaucracy or Germany's influence in the Eurozone, links Russia's foreign policy to Eurosceptics. Marine Le Pen declared: 'we believe in the border which protects, which is a healthy limit between the nation and the rest of the world: an economic, financial, migratory, sanitary and environmental filter' (Front National 2012) Similarly, Italian Northern League's warm feelings towards Russia are to a large extent driven by the party's antipathy towards the European Union. Bureaucratic Brussels is what the party critically juxtaposes with their vision of a 'Europe of the fatherlands', an alliance of regions using local currencies (Savino 2015: 9).

Soft Power and Support for Russian Foreign Policy

The previous sections have suggested that Russia possesses soft power across a number of conservative domains that can be seen in elite and popular responses across the world to Russian domestic and foreign policy. This includes Russia's defence of traditional values, including heteronormativity and Christianity; its promotion of illiberal governance models and crackdowns on civil society groups and nationalism; Putin's image as a strong, decisive leader in counterdistinction to weak and bureaucratic democratic leaders; and an anti-American foreign policy that focusses on sovereignty and pluralism. In each of these categories, Russia has global constituencies, beyond its post-Soviet sphere of influence, that view it as a leader in promoting these values.

Most importantly, Russia's soft power attraction does what soft power is supposed to do: grant legitimacy and moral authority to its foreign policy. We can see this in two recent and controversial foreign policy decisions: to invade Crimea and to intervene in the Syrian civil war. The European Union's decision to sanction Russia met with heated opposition from political elites who positively identified with Russia. Orbán said that the EU was 'shooting itself in the foot' with respect to sanctions. Additionally, he used the Russian annexation of the Crimea as a pedestal from which to call for 'dual citizenship, collective rights and autonomy' of ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine (2014c). Marine Le Pen argued that the European Union had declared a Cold War on Russia with the sanctions (Front National 2012), a position similarly taken by other far-right leaders in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands (Prentice 2014, Amann and Lokshin 2016, Jones 2015, Tremlett 2015). The Italian Northern League secretary also opposed sanctions and argued that 'In Crimea there are two million people, who have chosen freely to remain Russian.' (BBC Monitoring Europe 2014) Even some centre-right French politicians visited Crimea to counter Western propaganda on the issue (Haddad 2015). In the United States, Donald Trump chose a foreign policy advisor who referred to the 'so-called annexation' of Crimea (Snyder 2016), implied that the Crimea was not part of the Ukraine in an interview and, when corrected, stated that 'the people of Crimea, from what I've heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were.' (Pengelly and Gambino 2016) This support was not

only discursive, but resulted in Trump supporters watering down support for the Ukraine in the Republican platform (Rogin 2016).

Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2016 also gained broad support from different parts of the world even while it was condemned by major states in the West. It was celebrated across the European far-right spectrum, where it was seen as a step in the right direction towards multipolarity (Shekhovtsov 2014). Marie le Pen similarly argued that 'It's a relief for us to see Islamic State retreat, and how Russia has succeeded where the EU has totally failed ... Despite harsh criticism of Bashar Assad's government, it is the lesser evil in comparison with ISIS.' (2016) She also accused the United States of attempting to undermine Russia's airstrikes (2015c). Victor Orbán also praised Russia for helping to solve the crisis in Syria (Sadecki 2016). China positively evaluated Russia's support for Bashar Assad and saw Moscow's bombing campaign, which took place at the invitation of Assad's government, as a confirmation of Syria's sovereignty. The general sentiment on the Chinese Internet is that Russia is getting things done and 'simply trying to fight terrorists.' (Allen-Ebrahimian 2015) Donald Trump similarly backed Putin's efforts, arguing in the fourth presidential debate, 'If Putin wants to go and knock the hell out of ISIS, I am all for it, 100 percent, and I can't understand how anybody would be against it.' (Evans, Holland, and Stephenson 2015) Trump followed up on the subject almost a year later, declaring 'Wouldn't it be nice if we got together with Russia and knocked the hell out of ISIS?' (Reuters 2016)

In sum, Russian soft power is not simply about finding inspiration in Russian values. Those who are attracted to Russian ideological soft power also support controversial Russian policies, making it easier for Russia to operate in the world and challenge Western foreign policy.

Conclusion

In 2013, Joseph Nye argued that the Russians do not really understand soft power because they see the government, and not liberal civil society, as the main instrument of soft power (Nye Jr. 2013). This paper suggests that Nye's view, in 2013 just as in 1990, is affected by a liberal democratic bias that makes considering conservative soft power impossible. Across the literature on Russian soft power, this approach has led to an excessive focus on instrumentality and cultural attractiveness. This approach not only greatly limits the potential geographic scope of Russian soft power influence, but in its instrumentalization conflates Russian soft power with Russian public relations.

The tendency to focus on attraction by design, rather than by appeal, has diverted scholars' attention from the reception side of soft power and prevented an engagement with the potential attractiveness of conservative ideas and a governance model diverging from a liberal democracy. Instead, those who see Russian conservative values as attractive and/or look towards Moscow for leadership are simply labelled 'useful idiots' or puppets of a larger Kremlin program (Polyakova 2016, Sierakowski 2014). While this type of discourse might be useful to temporarily delegitimize Russophile actors, it dangerously underestimates the potential for non-liberal ideas to be attractive to an increasing number of individuals across the West and the globe more generally.

We argued, alternatively, that the values the Russian government offers need to be understood as attractive in their own right, and that conservative values can be a source of inspiration that generates followership. Throughout this paper we have suggested a revision in the soft power concept that would enable it to account for this illiberal appeal. Our findings suggest that the concept of soft power has to go beyond the familiar and safe world of Western liberal values, democratic governance, and presumably responsible foreign policy.

While there is no doubt that conservative ideologies existed in many of the states we analysed before Moscow embarked on its explicit conservative values narrative, the rise of populist, right-wing parties across Europe has given these agendas an additional boost. It has created the opportunity for these parties to see Russia as a working model for their political projects and given them an ideological partnership with a member of the UN Security Council. The narrative about conservative values pushed forward by Russia can help formerly marginal parties legitimize the normative content of their message by showing that their set of ideas is possible to implement. Moreover, it gives the Russian state potential ideological allies and sets the stage for the emergence of a sense of comradeship that shields Russia from the political effects of their more controversial foreign policy goals.

Additionally, there are two reasons to worry that this capability might be bolstered in the coming years. The first is the growing awareness on the part of the Russian elites that the ideological soft power at their disposal is larger than they perceive, and can be leveraged to make Russia the 'leader of the nonliberal world', as head of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy Sergei Karaganov put it (Wilson 2015a: 295). The second is the potential for increasing populist and conservative politics in the West and across the world to bolster public approval of these conservative policies. This has the potential to create a 'virtuous' cycle, whereby Russia, as a model of conservative governance, helps external elites with conservative values and illiberal aspirations to become more mainstream in their home countries, which then only reinforces the capacities of Russian foreign policy.

As our reconsideration of the soft power concept shows, theoretical or analytical tools tend to reflect a specific viewpoint and are embedded in value preferences. When applied without "translation", they can distort the understanding of processes and forces at play in international politics. The idea of conservative soft power allows scholars to properly engage with the effectiveness of non-Western powers in challenging liberal international order. Rather than simply sounding alarm bells at ideological aggression, it offers a tool to gauge the power to attract and allows considering states such as Russia as potential normative powers.

Even if Russia does not offer a detailed model of political organization nor a precise definition of conservatism, particular elements of its governance, such as strong leadership, the centralization of decision-making processes, and its perceived boldness during domestic and international crises appeal to a number of political actors in the democratic world. It is about time to acknowledge that these political actors, whom we would prefer to disregard for the evident mismatch between their values and ours, are not simply lacking in political agency as pawns of the Kremlin, and that their attraction to Russian values is a serious phenomenon.

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